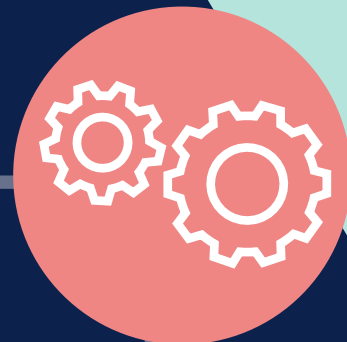


Business plan 2023-24



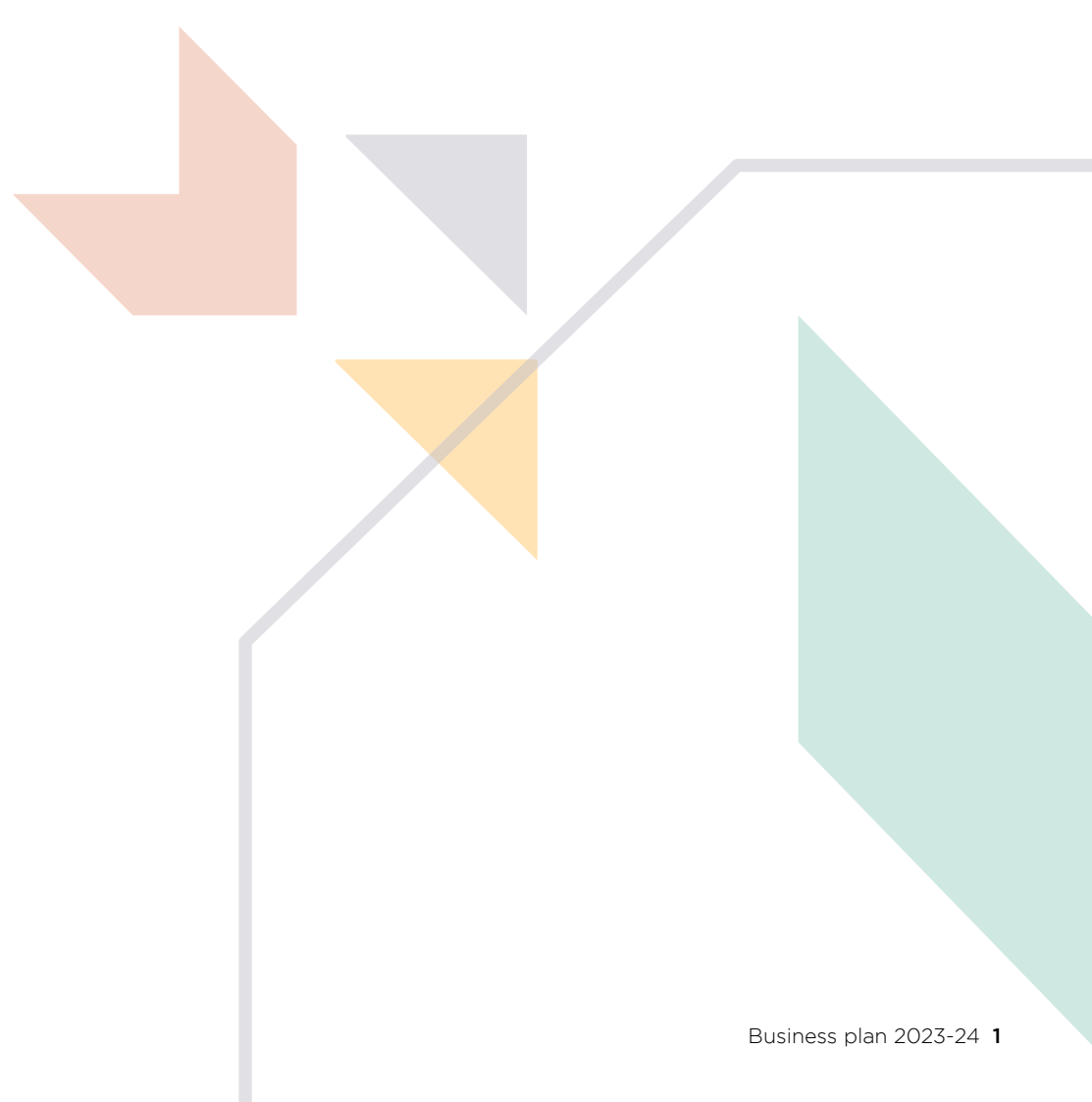
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Contents

Foreword	2
How the business plan works	3
Our eleven goals	4
Quality and standards	5
Equality of opportunity	9
Enabling regulation	14
Operations	17



Foreword

This business plan sets out what the Office for Students (OfS) will do in 2023-24, the second year of our three-year strategy which sees us transition from initial set-up to routine delivery of regulatory activity.¹

Over the first year of this strategy (2022-2023), we took steps to secure progress in the two interconnected areas on which we are focused: quality and standards; and equality of opportunity. This business plan shows how we will continue to make progress in these areas.

While many English universities and colleges offer their students an outstanding academic experience, our work as a regulator focuses on providers and courses where students may not be receiving the high quality education they deserve. This work entered a new phase over the past year. Our revised quality requirements came into effect, and we have opened investigations where we are concerned that courses are not delivering the academic experience and positive outcomes students expect. We also launched the latest version of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to recognise universities and colleges that deliver excellence beyond our minimum requirements.

We are now implementing our new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education. Universities and colleges that want to charge higher fees will be required to publish their plan to tackle risks to equality of opportunity for students – including the risk that students' attainment at school may not allow them to access higher education. We expect universities and colleges to evaluate their activity to establish what works to improve equality of opportunity for all students.

Alongside our core regulatory activity, we continue to recognise the need to engage effectively with those we regulate. Following the findings from independent research, we have already set out how we will refresh our approach to engagement with providers, including regular online sessions for vice-chancellors and principals and a series of visits to institutions by senior OfS staff.²

This plan for 2023-24 sets out how we will continue to focus on quality and standards and equality of opportunity, while also delivering regulation that enables an effective higher education system. The plan provides transparency about how we are working in the interests of the students and taxpayers who fund English higher education, and we welcome feedback about our approach. Our mission remains the same – to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. I look forward to working with students, providers and others to make this a reality.

Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive, Office for Students

¹ The OfS strategy 2022-2025 is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/refreshing-our-engagement-with-providers/.

How the business plan works

This OfS business plan sets out the work we intend to do in 2023-24 to make progress on our three-year goals. These goals are the specific outcomes we are seeking to achieve, as set out in our strategy for 2022-2025.³

In the strategy, we specify two areas of higher education that we will focus on over this strategic period: 'quality and standards' and 'equality of opportunity'. The goals either advance our two areas of focus or they facilitate our work. They are listed on the next page.

Our business plan outlines the actions we will take over the year to achieve these goals. We have also included the operational activities that support our work and our plans to make them better.

For simplicity, we refer throughout this document to our expectations to publish information. However, final decisions to publish information will be taken having had due regard to all relevant legislation.

- The online version of the plan is available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-business-plan/.
- To provide feedback on the plan, contact info@officeforstudents.org.uk.

³ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/.

Our eleven goals



Quality and standards

Students receive a high quality academic experience that improves their knowledge and skills, with increasing numbers receiving excellent provision.

Students are rigorously assessed, and the qualifications they are awarded are credible and comparable to those granted previously.

Providers secure free speech within the law for students, staff and visiting speakers.

Graduates contribute to local and national prosperity, and the government's 'levelling up' agenda.



Equality of opportunity

Students' access, success and progression are not limited by their background, location or characteristics.

Prospective students can choose from a diverse range of courses and providers at any stage of their life, with a wide range of flexible and innovative opportunities.

Providers act to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct and respond effectively if incidents do occur.

Providers encourage and support an environment conducive to the good mental health and wellbeing that students need to succeed in their higher education.



Enabling regulation

Providers are financially viable and sustainable and have effective governance arrangements.

Students receive the academic experience they were promised by their provider and their interests as consumers are protected before, during and after their studies.

The OfS minimises the regulatory burden it places on providers, while ensuring action is effective in meeting its goals and regulatory objectives.



Quality and standards

Students receive a high quality academic experience that improves their knowledge and skills, with increasing numbers receiving excellent provision.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will take action against providers where our requirements for high quality education, including positive outcomes for students, are not being met. We will also encourage providers to go beyond these requirements by publishing ratings for teaching excellence at individual providers.

Work area	Description
Investigation and enforcement	<p>We will continue our quality and standards investigations for individual providers, opening new investigations where appropriate</p> <p>We will continue to use independent academic assessors to deliver these investigations</p> <p>We expect to publish our regulatory decisions following these investigations</p>
Quality and standards assessment	<p>We will take on responsibility for assessing the quality and standards of courses offered by providers seeking to register with us or to award their own degrees⁴</p> <p>We will continue to recruit and train independent academic assessors to undertake these assessments</p> <p>We will provide external quality assurance for degree apprenticeships</p>
Student outcomes	<p>We intend to update the student outcomes indicators we publish for individual providers⁵</p> <p>We will assess the student outcomes delivered by individual providers and take action where appropriate</p> <p>We expect to publish the outcomes of our assessments of student outcomes</p>
Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)	<p>We will support the TEF panels' assessment of each provider</p> <p>We expect to publish and promote final TEF ratings, following a planned representations process⁶</p> <p>We will commission an evaluation of the TEF and prepare to consult on the next exercise</p>

⁴ These assessment activities were previously delivered by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its role as the designated quality body (DQB). See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/quality-and-standards/quality-and-standards-assessments/.

⁵ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/.

⁶ Guidance on TEF 2023 is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023/.

Work area	Description
Transnational education (TNE)	<p>We will work with the designated data body to consult on a new approach to collecting data on providers' TNE activities</p> <p>We will engage with UK and overseas stakeholders about the regulatory arrangements for TNE</p>
Evaluation	<p>We will continue to evaluate the impact of our revised approach to regulating student outcomes</p> <p>We will continue to evaluate the impact of our blended learning review</p>

Students are rigorously assessed, and the qualifications they are awarded are credible and comparable to those granted previously.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will investigate potential concerns about assessment and awarding practices at individual higher education providers, and publish insight and data to influence other providers to meet our minimum requirements.

Work area	Description
Analysis of attainment data	We expect to publish an updated analysis of the changes in degree classifications awarded over time, including the extent to which these changes can be explained through statistical modelling
Investigation and enforcement	<p>We will continue our investigations of potential concerns that providers may not satisfy our regulatory requirements for rigorous assessment and awarding practices</p> <p>We expect to publish our regulatory decisions following these investigations</p>
Insight on assessment and awarding	We intend to publish a review highlighting our concerns about some assessment and awarding practices



Providers secure free speech within the law for students, staff and visiting speakers.

What we will do in 2023-24

Prior to new legislation coming into effect, we will respond to individual cases where providers may not be taking steps to secure free speech and academic freedom within the law. We will seek to publish our findings so other providers better understand our requirements. We will develop and consult on a new approach to regulating free speech in higher education, shaped by engagement with students.

Work area	Description
Investigation and enforcement	We will identify cases where a provider may have failed to take steps to secure academic freedom and free speech within the law We expect to publish the outcomes of our investigations
Response to new legislation	Following the passage of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill we will consult on a new regulatory approach to free speech and academic freedom We will involve students and students' unions in shaping our regulatory approach to free speech

Graduates contribute to local and national prosperity, and the government's 'levelling up' agenda.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will ensure that providers satisfy, or exceed, our minimum requirements for students progressing to professional employment or further study. We will also run programmes to address skills shortages and will work with partners to shape wider skills policy.

Work area	Description
Student outcomes	We expect to publish student outcomes indicators for individual providers, including the rate at which students progress to professional employment or further study
Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)	We expect to publish the TEF indicators for individual providers, including the rate at which students progress to professional employment or further study
Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)	We will assess the actions set out in providers' access and participation plans to address gaps in progression rates for different groups of students

Work area	Description
Funding to address skills needs	<p>We will continue, with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, to provide funding for degree conversion courses in artificial intelligence (AI) and data science</p> <p>We intend to publish an evaluation of our funding partnership with Research England to involve students in knowledge and skills exchange between higher education and other sectors</p>
Wider skills policy	<p>We will work with the Department for Education (DfE) and other stakeholders to ensure our regulatory approach is appropriate in the context of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE)⁷</p> <p>We will launch an initial consultation on student outcome measures for LLE-funded provision</p> <p>We will work with DfE, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) and Ofsted to ensure an efficient and effective regulatory system for higher technical qualifications (HTQs) and degree apprenticeships</p>



⁷ The Lifelong Loan Entitlement is a government policy to provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime.



Equality of opportunity

Students' access, success and progression are not limited by their background, location or characteristics.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will implement our new approach to regulating equality of opportunity, including revised access and participation plans to tackle risks to equality of opportunity for students. We will monitor progress in delivery of current access and participation plans and ensure that providers are delivering high quality education and good outcomes for students from all backgrounds. Using funding, guidance and evidence of 'what works', we will support providers to make progress on access and participation.

Work area	Description
Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)	<p>We will recruit and support a cohort of providers to submit access and participation plans for 2024-25, under our new approach</p> <p>We will assess these plans and, where appropriate, engage with providers to finalise them</p> <p>We will prepare to assess plans for 2025-26 onwards, refining existing guidance as appropriate</p>
Access and participation plans (current)	<p>We will continue to monitor providers' progress against current access and participation plans</p> <p>We will follow up with individual providers that may not be on track to deliver their commitments to improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups in higher education</p> <p>We will assess and approve variations to current access and participation plans submitted by providers</p> <p>We expect to publish updates to our access and participation data dashboard</p>
Equality of Opportunity Risk Register	<p>We will monitor how providers are using our newly published Equality of Opportunity Risk Register</p> <p>We will review and update the risk register to ensure it provides an appropriate and evidence-based reflection of risks to equality of opportunity in higher education</p>
Evaluation	<p>We will evaluate the impact of our revised approach to regulating equality of opportunity</p>

Work area	Description
Quality regulation	Our regulation of quality and student outcomes will consider whether individual providers are delivering high quality and positive outcomes for students from all backgrounds
Funding	We will allocate recurrent funding to eligible providers to support student access and success
Uni Connect	<p>We will continue to deliver our Uni Connect programme, supporting local partnerships of providers to advise underrepresented groups about entering higher education</p> <p>We will monitor phase three of the programme and engage our stakeholders to develop our future policy on collaborative outreach</p>
Raising attainment in schools	<p>We will receive plans for raising attainment in schools from Uni Connect partnerships</p> <p>We intend to publish a review of school partnership activity described in access and participation plans submitted by providers</p> <p>We will engage with providers and schools to identify effective practice in raising attainment</p>
Effective practice	<p>We will develop a mechanism for capturing providers' evaluation findings and producing evidence-based effective practice resources</p> <p>We will determine the future funding approach for the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) and support it to deliver evaluation and evidence functions, linked to its oversight of access and participation plans</p> <p>We will review the impact of the Disabled Students' Commission, managed by Advance HE, and consider our next steps on improving disabled students' experience</p> <p>We will oversee and evaluate the joint funding programme with Research England to increase access and participation in postgraduate research for black, Asian and minority ethnic students</p>

Prospective students can choose from a diverse range of courses and providers at any stage of their life, with a wide range of flexible and innovative opportunities.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will improve and promote the information available to prospective students for choosing courses and providers. We will also enable providers to supply greater choice to students by allocating funding and putting in place validation arrangements.

Work area	Description
Information for student choice	<p>We will implement changes to the National Student Survey (NSS) and run the survey</p> <p>We will provide information and guidance about different options for study through the Discover Uni website</p>
Funding	<p>We will continue to allocate funding to subjects and courses that would otherwise be undersupplied by providers, via competitions, our recurrent grant and specialist provider funding</p> <p>We will launch a consultation on our approach to funding</p>
Regulatory operations	<p>We will continue to register new providers and authorise degree awarding powers, increasing high quality choices for students</p>
Validation arrangements	<p>We will oversee the pilot (launched with DfE and the Open University) to offer validation partnerships to further education colleges that want to provide higher technical qualifications</p>

Providers act to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct and respond effectively if incidents do occur.

What we will do in 2023-24

Subject to consultation, we propose to introduce new regulation that sets minimum requirements for providers in preventing and responding to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct affecting students. We will collect new survey data and use this and other regulatory intelligence to better understand the issues.

Work area	Description
New approach to regulating harassment and sexual misconduct	<p>We will analyse the responses to our consultation on a new approach to regulating harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education, and publish our decisions</p>

Work area	Description
Prevalence survey of sexual misconduct	<p>We will pilot a prevalence survey of sexual misconduct in higher education, and expect to report on the results</p> <p>We will develop plans to conduct a full survey, collecting data on sexual misconduct at provider level</p>
Stakeholder engagement	<p>We will continue to engage with other organisations with expertise to better understand the issues and inform our work</p> <p>We will continue to work with students to ensure providers act to prevent and respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct</p>

Providers encourage and support an environment conducive to the good mental health and wellbeing that students need to succeed in their higher education.

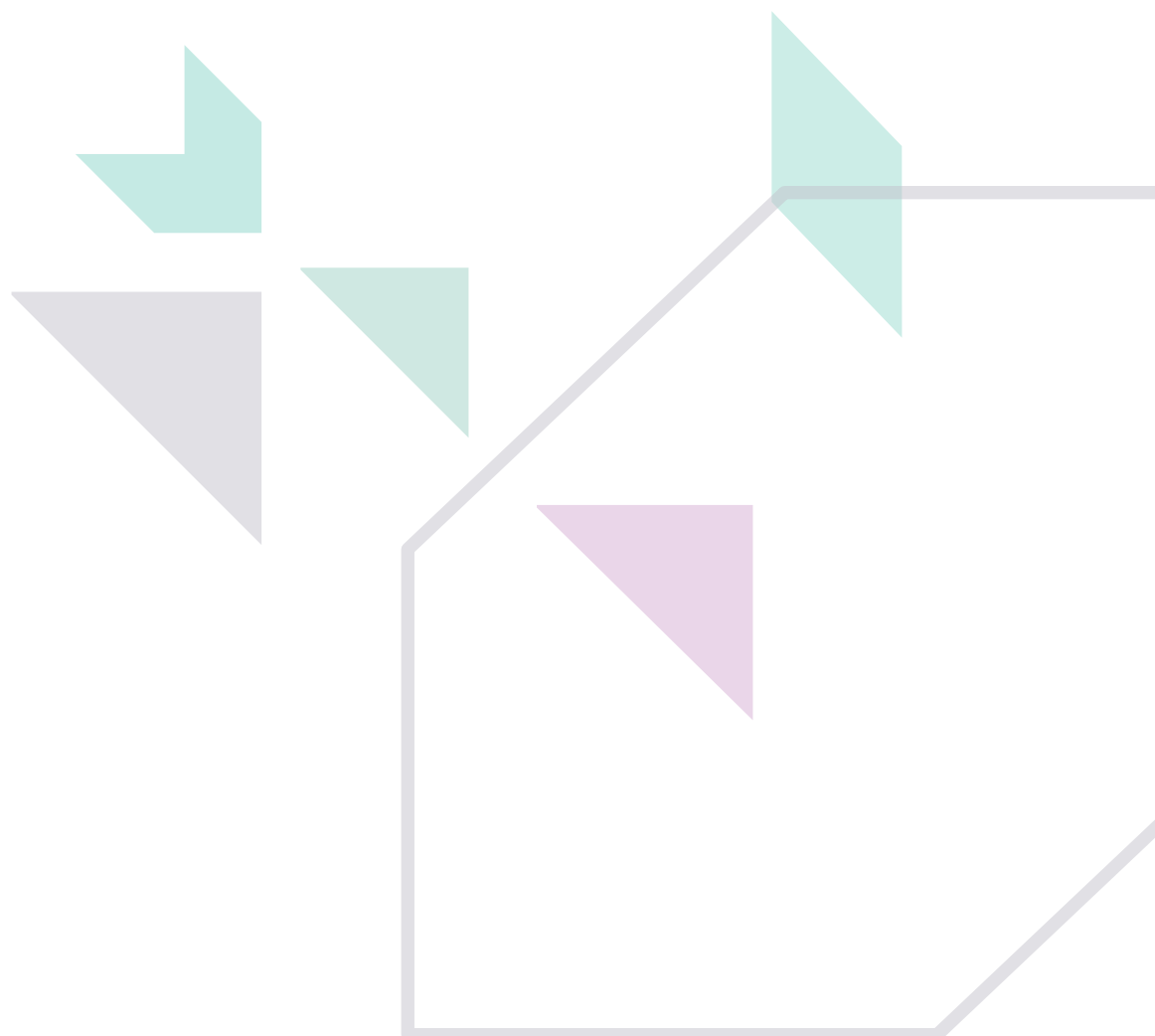
What we will do in 2023-24

We will encourage higher education providers to address mental health among students as a risk to equality of opportunity. We will ensure that providers understand the scale and nature of mental health issues in higher education and know how best to support their students.

Work area	Description
Access and participation plans (2024-25 onwards)	We will assess and approve access and participation plans, including those that address mental health among students, as identified by our Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
Effective practice	<p>We will conclude projects funded under our Mental Health Funding Competition, and intend to publish an evaluation</p> <p>We will commission action learning sets to support effective joint working between providers' student support services and local NHS mental health services</p> <p>We intend to publish a digital repository of 'what works' in mental health</p>



Work area	Description
Communications	<p>We intend to publish an Insight brief on mental health among students</p> <p>We intend to collate and publish information for providers about suicide prevention</p> <p>We expect to publish an update to our access and participation data dashboard, including data on students with a declared mental health condition</p>
Student Space	<p>We will fund and manage with our partners this online resource to provide wellbeing information and support for students</p>





Enabling regulation

Providers are financially viable and sustainable and have effective governance arrangements.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will monitor the financial viability and sustainability of higher education providers in England, individually and across the sector. We will identify providers with significant financial risks, or management and governance weaknesses, and intervene to protect the interests of students and taxpayers.

Work area	Description
Monitoring and intervention	<p>We will continue to monitor the financial viability and sustainability of providers, including through the annual financial returns they submit, and intervene where appropriate</p> <p>We will further develop our approach to protecting public money within individual providers, working with DfE and the Student Loans Company</p> <p>We will identify providers with management and governance weaknesses and intervene where appropriate</p>
Financial risk	<p>We will identify and model the impact of financial risks on providers to anticipate issues and better protect students</p> <p>We will publish an annual report on sector financial sustainability</p>
Market exit	<p>We will improve our ability to identify and engage with providers at risk of exiting the market and establish student protection measures</p> <p>We will respond to any cases of likely provider closure and will intervene to protect the interests of students</p>
Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC)	<p>We will compile and publish TRAC data, helping providers and public funders understand the costs of higher education teaching and research</p>
Funding assurance	<p>We will give assurance to the National Audit Office (NAO) and other funders over the public funding distributed to providers</p>

Students receive the academic experience they were promised by their provider and their interests as consumers are protected before, during and after their studies.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will engage with students, providers and other stakeholders about our approach to protecting students' interests as consumers. We will continue to take action where providers may not be complying with consumer protection law.

Work area	Description
Investigation and enforcement	<p>We will refer student consumer protection cases to National Trading Standards (NTS), under our partnership⁸</p> <p>We will review the effectiveness of our partnership with NTS and consider extending the arrangement</p>
Advice and guidance	<p>We will engage with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) as it reviews its consumer law advice for higher education providers, and will publicise the updated advice</p> <p>We will publish an Insight brief on protecting students as consumers and hold an event to inform students, providers and others about our remit in this area</p> <p>We intend to publish more information about our future approach to protecting students' interests as consumers</p>

The OfS minimises the regulatory burden it places on providers, while ensuring action is effective in meeting its goals and regulatory objectives.

What we will do in 2023-24

We will become increasingly risk-based in the way we monitor compliance and take enforcement action. We will continue to seek opportunities to reduce burden and will engage with providers to test the burden of our regulation against the benefits.

Work area	Description
Risk-based approach	<p>We will update our intervention strategy, focusing our regulatory activity on areas of greatest concern</p> <p>We will identify conditions of registration that the OfS believes may no longer represent an appropriate regulatory approach and consult on removing or revising those conditions</p> <p>We will continue to consider proportionality in our requests to individual providers for additional information</p>

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-ofs-national-trading-standards-partnership-to-protect-students-rights-as-consumers/.

Work area	Description
Dialogue with providers	<p>We will begin new provider engagement activity, including online sessions and visits to providers by senior OfS staff</p> <p>We will improve the OfS website, including presenting the regulatory framework in a more accessible way</p> <p>We will invite providers' views on regulatory burden when consulting on any changes to our regulation</p>
Exempt charities	<p>We will fulfil our responsibilities as the principal regulator for those higher education providers in England that are exempt charities, and for exempt charities that are closely connected with them⁹</p>

Regulatory operations

What we will do in 2023-24

We will continue to operate and improve the core regulatory activity that enables both the OfS and the English higher education system to function. These operations underpin our ambitions for quality and standards and equality of opportunity.

Work area	Description
Regulatory operations	<p>We will consider applications from providers seeking to register with the OfS</p> <p>We will consider applications from providers seeking powers to award their own degrees</p> <p>We will consider applications from providers to use 'university' in their name</p> <p>We will monitor registered providers' compliance with our conditions of registration, considering reportable events and notifications</p> <p>We will consider applications from registered providers to gain degree awarding powers or use 'university' in their name</p> <p>We will monitor higher education providers' compliance with the Prevent duty</p> <p>We will improve the way we deliver our regulatory operations, including recording information and managing cases</p>

⁹ An exempt charity is not directly regulated by the Charity Commission and instead has a principal regulator, thereby avoiding duplicate regulatory burden.



Operations

What we will do in 2023-24

We will run effective operations that enable us to deliver our work, and seek to improve these operations over the year.

Work area	Description
Student engagement	<p>We will refresh the way we work with our student panel</p> <p>We will build our capacity to engage students more widely in our work</p> <p>We will engage with student representatives beyond our student panel, including making student union officers aware of our role and remit</p> <p>We will continue to poll students regularly and undertake wider research to gather student views to inform our policy development</p> <p>We will demonstrate where student insight has had an impact on our work</p> <p>We will regularly publish our Student Spotlight newsletter</p>
Provider engagement	<p>We will begin new provider engagement activity, including online sessions and visits to providers by senior OfS staff</p> <p>We will continue to produce Insight briefs, our annual review and host events addressing current issues in higher education</p> <p>We will improve the OfS website, including a new, more accessible version of the regulatory framework</p>
Staff development	<p>We will deliver staff training on regulatory theory and practice</p> <p>We will train our managers on performance management, coaching, and leading hybrid teams</p>

Work area	Description
Efficiency and effectiveness	<p>We will deliver a programme to improve the operation of our support functions</p> <p>We will develop tools and resources to build our evaluation capacity</p> <p>We will implement a new data analysis platform and new resource planning and management software</p> <p>We intend to publish the annual OfS value for money review, focusing on efficient, effective and economic use of our resources</p>
Data operations	<p>We will oversee the work of our designated data body, including the Data Futures programme</p>





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